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ABSTRACT

While the populations of students learning writing in English as a second language (ESL) are diverse and have widely varying needs, three general recommendations to nonspecialist teachers of ESL pupils are to: (1) organize courses according to thematic unity; (2) limit the number of formal, polished essays assigned; and (3) encourage students to develop and use all four language skills (listening, writing, reading, and speaking) in the composition classroom. Composition teachers with a firm grounding in process methodology are in an excellent position to help ESL students develop language skills. The processes of learning a language and learning to write are analogous, and what has been learned about one process can be used to teach the other. (MSE)

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What To Do In Composition Classes
When You Have ESL Students and No ESL Expertise

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Introduction

Our inspiration for this paper came during the 1986 Conference on Composition and Communication when several participants in the post-convention ESL workshop came up after our presentation and asked us, "Where should I start? I have no background in English as a Second Language, and I have just been given three classes of it to teach" or in one case, "a whole ESL program to run." Of course, our first recommendation was that they immediately obtain a subscription to the TESOL Quarterly. Back home in Tucson, we decided that these teachers' questions called for a more detailed response, since they are questions we often confront as members of the University of Arizona's Composition Board whose duties include coordinating the ESL strand of the composition program and working with graduate teaching assistants who are novice teachers of ESL.

We recognize that important differences exist among ESL composition programs. Student populations can very tremendously,with classes ranging from primarily monolingual groups of American immigrants to a polyglot of international students who intend to return to their home countries after completion of an undergraduate or graduate degree. For instance, one university teacher might find herself with an advanced ESL

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composition class of new graduate students who are trying their best to adjust to their first semester of study in the United States. At the same time, a colleague down the hall may be involved in a special developmental writing program for language minority teenagers who have embraced the attitudes, interests and work habits of the typical American high school student. Meanwhile, teachers at a nearby community college might be faced with providing language instruction to a group of of adult refugees who have a below-third-grade education in their mother tongue.

While we cannot hope specifically to address the very different needs of such diverse groups in a paper of this nature, we would like to make three general recommendations derived from research in composition and from ESL teaching methodology. Our examples are drawn from our own experiences teaching advanced ESL composition classes, but we feel the recommendations can be applied to all levels of composition instruction. In our paper, we will also refer to the bibliography that we have prepared to provide background reading for those who have little formal training in ESL.

Thematic Units

Our first recommendation is that courses be organized according to thematic unity, or to use the parlance currently fashionable in the literature, that they be "content-based." May Shih describes content-based academic writing courses as ". . . composition courses organized organized around sets of readings on selected topics" (632). There are several advantages

to content-based instruction. First, recursive encounters with a topic allow students--be they native or non-native speakers of English--to build a whole body of information to think about and write on. Moreover, as students examine different aspects of a topic over a period of time, their lexical knowledge increases even as their intellectual understanding of the subject deepens; the result is greater fluency. Yet another advantage of content-based composition instruction, as Shih points out, is that it helps the students develop thinking and writing skills needed for work in all academic disciplines, skills such as "collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting new information from external sources" (628).

Several approaches are possible when designing thematic units. First, we know that people write best about subjects they know and care about, so we suggest that the choice of unit themes take into account the students' experiences as well as their writing skills and academic needs. For example, students in our preparatory composition class, who have recently arrived in the United States and are just beginning their studies, do well reading, discussing, and writing about experiences with language, paralingual communication and cultural differences--topics which are relevant to their positions as newcomers in a foreign culture. From these personal experiences, they extract low-level generalizations or inferences which become the focus for expository prose, which is, after all, the type of writing predominant in an academic setting, not the personal reflective essay we often like to assign in lower level composition classes for native speakers. Besides, it is important to realize that

some international students have aspects of their pasts that they do not care to reminisce about.

In advanced composition, our graduate students write from their considerable academic experience. These students, who are preparing to write theses or dissertations, compose abstracts, reviews of journal articles, informal research proposals, and publishable reports on topics in their field. In this course, composition instruction is not just content-based; it is also highly individualized.

Another way to ensure that undergraduates explore topics that interest them is to enlist their help in selecting thematic units. In our first semester freshman composition class, for instance, we ask students to review the table of contents of our reader, Making Connections: Readers for Writers. They then write a proposal to their teacher stating what sections of the text they would like the class to cover. Since some international students are told by their governments what they must study, using this approach in an English class can offer students a refreshing opportunity to pursue neglected interests. Some semesters the whole class will read the same essays and write papers on the same general topic (such as education or technology); other times, we have divided students into interest groups, allowing them to conduct discussions of related readings within their group and to contribute copies of library articles to their group's common store of information.

At times, however, teachers will want to preserve their control over the choice of theme and materials in order to insure that students approach one theme from different rhetorical

perspectives. Let us give an example: In our second semester freshman composition course, students read essays, poems, short stories, and two short novels--all relating to an overall theme, such as heroism or family and community. Each semester, the literature for this unit is supplemented with relevant short pieces which we collect and have copied; this compilation is sold in the bookstore along with the works of fiction. Although many teachers may prefer to work with one of the thematically arranged readers now available on the market, we find that using a compilation allows real flexibility in the choice of materials, enabling us to change the thematic focus of our course frequently and, incidentally, preventing the plagiarism of student papers submitted during the previous semester.

Reducing the Number of Formal Assignments

Our second recommendation is that teachers reduce the number of formal, polished essays they assign. As the emphasis in composition instruction has shifted from a product- to a process-oriented approach, at the University of Arizona we have decreased the number of formal papers students are required to submit. Instead, we provide them with more opportunities both for informal, exploratory writing to discover essay topics and for revison. Just as by extensive reading, students increase their reading rate and comprehension, so by extensive writing on a topic do they gain fluency in writing. Fluency is more important than correctness of expression in the early stages of the writing process because students are writing to discover ideas, to incorporate new information from a variety of sources, and to explore

connections. Eventually, some of this extensive writing becomes initial drafts for three or four intensive writing projects which culminate in formal, polished essays of 800 to 2500 words.

One advantage to this approach is that teacher response to student writing varies according to its place in the writing process. Vivian Zamel reminds us of the dangers of responding to all student writing "as if it were a final draft" (79). When we read exploratory writing or early drafts of student papers, our first concern should be ideas. Extensive marking of grammar at this point makes it difficult for students to jettison sentences or change passages that do not contribute effectively to ideas that are being developed. In our ESL composition classes, we do not usually put much emphasis on mechanics and expression until later stages of revision--a more appropriate time to consider correctness of grammar and niceties of expression.

Taco Homburg describes a system of classifying errors according to their effect on text comprehensibility which we find useful. One does not have to be an expert in linguistics to realize that syntax problems severe enough to obscure meaning are more of a concern for teachers than consistent misuse of the definite article or the occasional omission of -s endings on third person verb forms. We concede, however, that in some situations teachers may not have the resources to interpret the problems a student is having with the language. If this is the case, they may need to consult with an expert.

It takes time to approach native speaker fluency in a foreign language-- it is the result of prolonged exposure to the way the language is used in many different contexts. As Anne Raimes

has noted, complete mastery of syntax and expression are not a prerequisite for instruction in English rhetoric (187). It is understandable, however, that composition teachers working with ESL writers for the first time may become curious and quite concerned about the surface features of their students' writing. For this reason, our bibliography includes some articles contrasting linguistic and rhetorical features of other languages with those of English. These articles may help teachers understand ways in which ESL students' native language and background influence their production of English prose.

A Holistic Approach to Language Learning

Our third recommendation, which has been alluded to above, is that teachers encourage ESL students to develop and use all four language skills in the composition classroom: not just listening and writing, but also speaking and reading. Research in such a holistic approach to language learning suggests that instruction and practice in these other aspects of language reinforce writing skills.

Oral reports have been a standard assignment in many English classes, but the spontaneity required by group work gives ESL students unrehearsed spoken language practice. Long and Porter enumerate the positive effects of group work, not only from a pedagogical perspective, but also from the standpoint of language acquisition. Yet sometimes teachers who have successfully employed peer collaboration in their native English speaking classes fear that ESL students' cultural reservations or lack of oral proficiency will cause group work to fail.

We have not found this to be the case. In fact, group activities and peer editing contribute significantly to the inventive, drafting, and revision stages of student writing. We do recommend multilingual groupings, when possible, to insure the use of English as the medium of discussion. And, as is true for native English speakers, teachers have to explain clearly the rationale for group work since many students will be unfamiliar with this technique. Teachers will also need to structure group activities carefully, providing clear directives to the groups and allowing them sufficient time to complete the assigned task. Occasionally we have seen misunderstandings develop during peer editing exchanges, but tact, humor, and lessons in the polite subjunctive can help with students who have difficulty expressing criticism or accepting it--however constructive--from a peer.

Direct instruction in reading also has an important place in the ESL composition curriculum. Indeed, the literature has been focussing a good deal lately on the close relationship between reading and writing. We always model for our students how to skim, scan, and mark a text. Moreover, we are careful to preview in class all assigned readings. The ESL composition teacher--to an even greater extent than the basic writing teacher--cannot assume that students will understand what they read. All students need knowledge of the topic assigned (an issue we discussed in the section on thematic units), but ESL students, in particular, may need supplemental background information to help them understand a reading. Fraida Dubin stresses the importance of students' knowing "the whole context of a selection so that significant clues to meaning are not overlooked" (157). Echoing the

writing teacher's concern for audience, Dubin recommends ESL students be made aware of the conventions and characteristics of different text types: scholarly prose for experts, popular culture texts for the general public, and nonacademic nonfiction for the educated audience (155-157). What is more, their teacher may have to explain certain idioms and expressions or to supply them with additional information about life in the United States.

Students may also benefit from direction in how to be "active" readers. We have designed a special exercise to promote the kinds of reading and writing connections that active readers make. Whenever students have an assigned reading, they are required to explore, in brief paragraph-length passages, insights or questions that occur to them as they read. The teacher later reads and responds to the content of these informal compositions, herself modelling active involvement with a text. This exercise not only ensures that students are prepared for class discussions, but also encourages students to make connections beyond the literal level of the text. Some of these connections, when explored further, can be the source of ideas which eventually mature, through more writing and revision, into a formal essay.

Conclusion

In closing, we want to emphasize that composition teachers with a firm grounding in process metholodogy are in an excellent position to assist ESL students in developing language skills, even though such teachers are not language specialists <u>per se</u>. Obviously, a background in linguistics is **very** valuable to the teacher of ESL composition classes, but we wish to reassure you

that current theories of teaching composition complement the current theories in language acquisition.

Stephen Krashen, the foremost theorist on language acquisition, identifies two recursive processes in gaining competence in a language: acquisition and learning. During acquisition, the learner is exposed to "comprehensible input," developing fluency in a language with emphasis on understanding and communicating ideas, not on grammatical correctness. Is this not parallel to the early phases of the writing process when the student's focus is comprehending and generating content? Then, during what Krashen calls the learning process ("a conscious process that results in 'knowing about' language"*), the learner begins to monitor his output, consciously shaping it according to rhetorical, syntactic, and morphological conventions. How similar this process is to that engaged in by student writers as they revise and edit their compositions. Truly, what has been discovered about learning a language is applicable to learning to write and vice versa. May the analogous nature of these two activities provide encouragement and reassurance to composition teachers newly assigned to teach ESL classes.

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